

Opening Remarks by Maureen O'Neil
on the Panel Presentation
“Promoting Peace By Addressing Food Insecurity in South Asia”
November 7, 2001

It is my pleasure to welcome you to IDRC for this panel discussion on “Promoting Peace By Addressing Food Insecurity in South Asia”. We are honoured to have with us a distinguished group of South Asian activists, scientists and community people representing the South Asia Network on Food, Ecology and Culture, known as SANFEC.

SANFEC emerged as a network prior to the World Food Summit in 1996 with support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Canadian non-governmental organization Inter Pares, and is currently supported by IDRC. It brings together more than 50 non-governmental organizations from all countries of the region to formulate positions and arguments on key issues affecting the food-producing communities they work with.

They have been very effective at doing that, first bringing forward a South Asian Statement of Concern on Food, Ecology and Culture presented and widely discussed at the World Food Summit in Rome. Subsequently, they formulated a SANFEC position on the WTO's Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) concerning the patenting of life forms. They have also organized fora parallel to the summits of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) and contributed to SAARC discussions on the causes of trafficking in women and children in South Asia.

The participation of the food-producing communities, especially women farmers, in the development of domestic and regional policies on agriculture and food security is central to their work. Based on the experience of local communities, SANFEC has come to the conclusion that social instability in South Asia is caused in part by food insecurity in rural communities, which leads people to migrate from rural to urban areas. Their research has also shown that enhancing local food production is best achieved by promoting biodiversity-based production systems and sharing information and knowledge among farmers and with policymakers.

IDRC is interested in this perspective because it is grounded in local experience and links research to policy. While the causal links between social instability, poverty and food insecurity are plain enough to see, new and innovative thinking is needed to focus our attention on addressing these problems in relationship to each other. Peace building programs and poverty alleviation programs that do not enhance local capacity to produce food are ignoring a cornerstone of healthy and self-confident communities. We think that this developing country perspective can be useful to Canadians who are also grappling with issues such as globalization, sustainable food production systems and healthy rural communities at home.

I will introduce all of our speakers now, so that they can go directly from one presentation to the next. In reverse order of presentation, our speakers include:

Mr. Farhad Mazhar is the Managing Director of UBINIG, a Bangladeshi NGO that does Policy Research for Development Alternatives. Mr. Mazhar is a registered Pharmacist with years of practice in Bangladesh and the United States, experience that helped him play a key role during the 1970s in developing Bangladeshi capacity to produce generic drugs. He also holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the New York University. Over the last ten years Mr. Mazhar has facilitated the development of The New Agriculture Movement in Bangladesh, a social movement of over 60,000 households lead by women farmers. He will be speaking about the link between peace, poverty and biodiversity and the importance of bringing farmers' voices into policy debates of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation.

Mr. Sundaram Varma is a farmer from the arid state of Rajasthan in India. He has won several national awards for his talent at identifying crop varieties with useful characteristics and for developing a technique for growing trees in environments with only 25 cm of rainfall in a year. He will share this experience with us, assisted with translation by **Mr. Kirit Patel**. Mr. Patel is a PhD Student at the University of Guelph and member of SRISTI, an Indian NGO that identifies and supports innovative farmers who are solving problems on their own and scales up these innovations.

Bhuwon Sthapit of Nepal is a Senior Scientist with the International Plant Genetic Resource Centre, one of a number of international centres dedicated to poverty reduction through crop improvement. He has a PhD in Rice Genetics from the University of Wales and currently leads a research effort in South Asia on community management of plant genetic resources. He will speak about the contribution of farmers to the process of innovation and scientific advancement in the area of plant genetic resources.

Mr. Shahid Zia is the Executive Director of the SUNGI Development Foundation of Pakistan [FOCAL partner for SANFEC] which works with some 200 rural communities totaling more than 15,000 farmers in the mountains of Pakistan. SUNGI focuses on enhancing food security, forest management and appropriate hydro power development. Mr Zia is a graduate from Oklahoma State University with a PhD in Agricultural Economics, and currently a member of two national committees on the WTO and the Plant Breeders Acts. His presentation will show how farmers from different countries in the region, including India and Pakistan, gain understanding of each other through events such as Biodiversity Fairs and Farmer Caravans.

Mr. Podiliname is the Director of the Centre for Human Development and Chairman of the Green Movement of Sri Lanka. He is also a founding member of the international network Action for Conflict Transformation. The Centre facilitates farmer to farmer exchanges of agricultural seed and knowledge of medicinal practices among Sinhalese, Hindu and Muslim communities in the conflict areas of Sri Lanka. He will share his specialist knowledge of the various uses of jackfruit, a key element in the food systems of the very poor.

Ms. Farida Akhter is well-known for her work in South Asia on women's reproductive rights, an issue she continues to address through the Women's Network of Bangladesh. She has a masters degree in sociology from the Chittigong University in Bangladesh, and currently co-manages UBINIG with Mr. Mazhar. Her talk today, based on grounded research with The New

Agriculture Movement, is about the role of uncultivated or “wild” foods in the survival strategies of the very poor.